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## Objects, Places and Stories of Transformative Youth Work

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### Cover Page Footnote

This article was generated from research conducted with former service users of a youth project in North-West Ireland. I want to thank Pat Forde and especially Caroline Costello from North Connaught Youth and Community Services for facilitating access to these young people. I want also to thank the young people who gave up their time to be interviewed. The research was undertaken for the HEI Inter-Professional module - co-created by marginalised youth, practitioners and students (project acronym HIP). EU Project Action: ACTION ERASMUS MULTILATERAL PROJECTS; Project number 540613-LLP-1-2013-1-DK-ERASMUS-EQR, 2013-2016. For further information see <http://hip.via.dk/>

## Objects, Places and Stories of Transformative Youth Work

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### Abstract

If researchers are sympathetic to the view that young people take an active part in creating their histories, they have to be vigilant to not only what young people say, but also to the resources they employ in constructing their narratives. This paper examines the implications of former participants of a youth work organisation unexpectedly employing objects on display in the organisation's meeting room to tell stories of transformative youth work encounters. These objects were pictures of young people receiving a civic award and candles co-created by young people and youth workers. The paper explores the practical and symbolic functions of these objects in the lives of young people. The paper also considers how a meeting room changes its meaning as a result of youth workers displaying objects linked with young people. Specifically, the meeting room may become a kind of liminal place where young people can reflect on their past, present and future lives. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications for youth work practice arising from former participants of a youth work programme investing objects on display in a youth work agency's meeting room with symbolic significance.

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**Key words:** Objects, places, youth work, storytelling.

### Introduction

We live in a time which prioritises the accumulation of evidence-based knowledge to deliver effective youth work practices. In gathering evidence of “what works” from a young person's perspective, we value research designs that appear structured and scientific. However, alternative discourses (e.g. In Defence of Youth Work Campaign (2009)) have emerged to challenge supposedly neutral monitoring approaches which attempt to measure the benefits of youth work practice. New methodologies have unfolded to present other types of evidence. For example, The *In Defence of Youth Work Campaign* has promoted the benefits of story-telling to highlight more personal and context-related evidence, foregrounding the experiences, voices and reflections of young people in youth work.

In this paper I suggest that young people can use interview spaces in unanticipated and creative ways to tell stories of transformative youth work encounters. Drawing on research<sup>1</sup> conducted in North-West Ireland, this paper reflects on how young people utilised objects on display in an interview room, in unforeseen and illuminating ways, to tell stories of transformative

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<sup>1</sup> HEI Inter-Professional module - co-created by marginalised youth, practitioners and students (project acronym HIP) EU Project Action: ACTION ERASMUS MULTILATERAL PROJECTS; Project number 540613-LLP-1-2013-1-DK-ERASMUS-EQR, 2013-2016. For further information see <http://hip.via.dk/>

interactions with youth workers. Moreover, the presence of these objects in a room can shape the meanings that young people associate with a social space, reminding us that youth workers can play an active role in shaping these representations to emerge.

The first aim of this paper is to explore how two young people unexpectedly employed objects in an agency meeting room to construct stories of positive youth work experiences. If we are sympathetic to the view that people take an active part in creating their histories, we have to be vigilant to not only what young people tell us, but also to the resources they employ in constructing their narratives. In this paper, I present how two young people employed candles and a picture of an awards ceremony to tell their stories of transformative youth work encounters. I reflect on the practical and symbolic properties associated with these objects. The second aim of this paper is to reflect on how the presence of objects in a meeting room can lead to this space becoming a significant and meaningful place for young people, opening up a range of associations and possibilities for them. Youth workers can shape a physical space such as a meeting room to evoke memories that young people can connect to their current and possible future lives. A meeting room, therefore, is not just a meeting room.

### **Places and Objects in Youth Work Practice**

We treasure relationships in youth work, but perhaps overlook the environment in which these relationships occur. We can take for granted the “place” where youth work is enacted, as social interactions must take place somewhere: “a surface where things just happen” (Agnew, 2011, p.317). However, the emergence of a “humanistic” turn in geography (Cresswell, 2009; Warf & Arias, 2009) reminds us of the material quality of a place, in which its meaning both shapes and is shaped by our spatial practices. Places are no longer viewed just as sites where humans perform, but as the catalysts and products of social action, in which humans are provided “a sensory experience that can both orientate and alienate” (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013, p.135).

The materiality of a youth work organisation may be influenced by factors beyond and within the youth worker’s domain. On the one hand, budgetary and regulatory factors - issues outside the purvey of the youth worker - may determine the physical location in which youth work takes place and influence phenomenological responses and professional practices. For example, all things being equal, it would not be surprising if the absence of natural light in a youth work setting influenced the nature of activities undertaken by youth workers and young people. On the other hand, youth workers can galvanise their agency. They can mediate a sense of place by positioning objects related to participants in certain ways. As O’Toole and Were (2008, p.618) suggest, a “place is the nexus of things and spaces within a given boundary, and has imputed values and interpretations”. They suggest that while material objects and places retain a functional purpose, they also create and communicate meaning. According to O’Toole and Were (2008, p.619), objects in a place generate meanings based on culture, function and power. Gibson (1979) suggests that particular objects and subjects relate with and influence one another, and that “what we see when we look at objects are their affordance” (Gibson, 1979, p.134). More systemically, places can also be seen as emerging from “a complex web of ongoing material, social and discursive relations and forms of practice, which in turn can be seen to form part of the production of experiences and the active composition of subjectivity” (McGrath & Reavey, 2013, p.125).

### **Methodology**

North Connaught Youth & Community Services Limited (NCYCS), a youth service provider in North-West Ireland, facilitated access to former participants to elicit their stories of youth work experiences. A number of factors influenced respondent sampling. It was decided to

focus on interviewing former rather than current participants for two reasons. First, the research had to be conducted within a relatively short time period, so it was decided not to interview young people less than 18 years old to reduce the risk of time slippage which might arise from negotiating permission to interview minors. Second, it was felt that former participants could offer a more considered perspective of their experiences, as they would have had some time to reflect on the contribution of a youth service and youth workers to their lives. Two other issues influenced sampling considerations. First, it was deemed important to interview young people younger than 23 years to ensure that memories of youth work were relatively fresh in their minds. Second, it was also deemed important to interview young people who had participated in a youth work programme with the agency for at least a year. Receiving a service for at least 12 months would enable young people to reflect on a range of experiences with the youth work agency.

Ethical permission for conducting this research was sought and received from the Research Office, IT Sligo. A research participation information document and consent form was supplied to prospective participants. As North-West Ireland is thinly populated but has strong social networks, extra care was given to protecting the anonymity of respondents. In addition to using pseudonyms to report findings, slightly altered versions of people's stories were generated by changing traits such as gender, age, ethnic background and town land to eliminate the risk of identification.

NCYCS facilitated access to 12 former participants for the research project. Interviews took place in 2015, in a number of urban and rural locations in North-West Ireland. Participation in the research was undertaken on an entirely voluntary basis, with no offer of incentives. Former participants were also reassured that research was being conducted independently of the organisation, thereby reducing potential for conflicts of interest or partiality. I used a topic guide to structure the interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Stories were analysed by drawing on a number of narrative inquiry approaches (e.g. structure, themes, and interactions or positioning (see Esin, 2011, p.98)). This paper draws on interviews with two respondents, which took place on the NCYCS premises in Sligo Town. The respondents had been in receipt of service provided by Youth Action Project Sligo [YAPS], a police diversion youth project, administered by NCYCS.

On reflection, greater attention should have been given to considering the research interview space, as respondents utilised objects from this environment to tell their stories of transformative encounters. The significance of these objects for respondents was unbeknown to me before the interviews commenced. Yet as Sanders says, "every artefact tells a story" containing both emotional and cognitive dimensions (Sanders, 2002, p.6). O'Toole and Were (2008, p.619) suggest that place and material objects taken together can illuminate situated social actions and are the result of these actions. Consequently, if this is the case, the qualitative researcher needs to be sensitive to the place in which she conducts interviews. Gagnon et al. (2015, p.204) note that researcher-respondent interactions are located, negotiated and experienced in specific spaces, suggesting that "place becomes an active element in its own right in the interview process".

## **Findings**

### *Objects and Stories of Transformation in Young People's Lives*

The research aimed to evoke young people's accounts of their experiences of supportive youth work interventions. I interviewed Mary and Gemina in a meeting room on the premises of a youth work agency. Mary and Gemina, best friends since primary school, now in their early-

20s, came to the attention of the Garda Síochána [Irish Police Service] in 2012 for shoplifting, which in turn led to a referral to the Youth Action Project Sligo [YAPS], a police diversion youth project.

Responding to a question concerning how YAPs had helped her, Mary replied

The thing we learnt here, things we did most every time we came in here, helped me, helped us so much like. We enjoyed it. It was - to enjoy like - to come back next time, and you can see we got an award...

At the same time she said this, Mary pointed to a picture of an awards ceremony. She then introduced a story about how she and Gemina had received a community award from the police service for making candles, telling me

We made a candle for the Christmas, three or four candles and we gave it to a charity, St Vincent de Paul, for old people, to have a real Christmas, because Christmas is a time for people to enjoy, we made something for charity and we got an award for that from the Gardaí [police service]... And you're still going to remember that you know. Every time I share that story with my friend actually I do tell them I had an award, what do you have? I have an award from the Guards, you know, even they think like, oh the Guards doesn't like you, whatever but they care, they Guards give me that, there's a picture taken with the Guards beside me, you know.

Later on in the interview, Mary returns to this topic, triggering her and Gemina to speak over one another.

Gemina: Actually that was the best. That's my memory in this place. In my life, I'm going to remember that till I die like.

Interviewer: It sounds a really obvious question, but why?

Gemina: One of the best things I ever done, you know, one of the best things.

Mary: Because it was at Christmas and we thought no, Christmas is a happy time. Christmas is when Mums and Dads, everyone sits together, have fun and there was this community () of Vincent de Paul - old people and they had nothing to do around Christmas, family might come and visit them like, come and go. We said no, we would give them something to remember. So we built small wood [candle base] and kind of wrapped it.

Gemina: We didn't give them money, this was a small act - like make them remember everything like, give them something to remember...make them remember everything () before they die-, oh yeah, I remember them two, they give us this, they give us that. I want people to remember me in a good way, you know.

The presence of objects in the interview room enabled Mary and Gemina to construct *their* stories of youth work experiences and to tell how these experiences affected them. The presence of an object can symbolise "something much greater than itself, and which calls for the association of certain conscious or unconscious ideas in order for it to be endowed with its full meaning and significance" (Morgan et al., 1983, p.5). Candles, for example, served a number of functions in their stories. Candles represent the material realisation of a series of decisions and actions by young people. Candles also signify the outcome of learning; they embody the fruits of collaborative practices between young people and youth workers. In

hindsight, a closer line of questioning may have unpacked the candle production journey; at the same time, the production of candles testify to Mary and Gemina being supported by youth work professionals to learn new skills to successfully plan and complete a project over a number of weeks.

Yet Mary and Gemina do not just highlight their involvement in producing candles; they utilise candles in their stories to construct and perform certain versions of themselves (Chase, 2015) in terms of relationships with others beyond the youth workspace. The presence of candles facilitates Mary and Gemina to tell stories about their moral and social development. By employing candles in their stories in a certain way, Mary and Gemina used language as a symbol system to organise their reflections (Drummond, 2000, p.257). Choosing to tell stories of using candles in certain ways enables them to locate themselves against constructions of less morally evolved individuals (i.e. earlier versions of themselves; relatives of older people). Gemina, for example, does not value relatives who make fleeting Christmas visits to other older relatives. She expresses her moral agency (i.e. “we said no”) by saying this kind of relationship was not for her; instead Gemina would prefer to have an enduring relationship with older people, signified by giving them presents. But rather than giving them money, Gemina places a greater value on making and distributing objects – “a small act” - as objects have an enduring quality (e.g. “I want people to remember me in a good way...”). Yet these remarks may also suggest that giving is not an unconditional act: there is a reciprocal quality, in that Gemina believes that by giving, she will get something in return. Gemina’s and Mary’s justification for not giving money as a gift may perhaps be seen in a new light if we infer that they have very little money to give in the first place. According to Mauss (1927, 2000), in societies that lack money, social relations can be materialised through the exchange of gifts. Older people, by accepting these candles, are actually reciprocating. Gemina and Mary are receiving a form of elder blessing. They are being remembered “in a good way”.

The photograph of an awards ceremony generated references to other forms of symbolism, particularly symbols associated with rituals and rites. Pointing to the photograph, Mary proudly highlighted an occasion when she and Gemina were photographed receiving a community award to acknowledge their kindness towards older people. The photograph showed Mary and Gemina standing alongside police officers and youth workers at a community event. Rites and rituals are important dimensions of the symbolic life of organisations (Drummond, 2000, p.264), and both Mary and Gemina welcome the ritual of receiving an award. Pettigrew (1979) suggests that rituals represent the dramatization of a myth and can be used to reinforce values and goals. The ritual of a prize-giving ceremony was a public event. It enabled Mary and Gemina to see that society appreciated their efforts to contribute to the community. By attending the awards ceremony and referring positively to it afterwards, two forms of rites can also be surmised. First, the prize-giving ceremony signals a rites of passage being successfully navigated. It acknowledges Mary and Gemina’s journey from one existence to another. The journey involves Mary and Gemina choosing new types of behaviours that the community respects. Second, there are rites of enhancement that aim to augment the status and social identities of individuals. By pointing to the photograph of the awards ceremony, Mary highlights a time and place where young people, youth workers and police officers stand with and not against one another. The awards ceremony both validates and contributes to the emerging social status of Mary and Gemina, in that it celebrates a new form of social engagement that Mary and Gemina have chosen to embrace.

## Objects, Places and Time Machines

Thanks to their material presence, stability, and boundaries, places bear witness to the history of past inhabitants, support everyday relations between present inhabitants, and manifest the cultural references that connect the past to future projections.

(Rampazi, 2016, p.361)

In this section I want to move beyond the micro-level of examining the role of objects in young people's stories of personal development to thinking about the contribution of objects in constituting a sense of place. I examine how the presence of particular objects in a meeting room generated a range of associations for young people, and consider the significance of this. The capacity for youth workers to develop relationships where young people feel valued and accepted is at the heart of youth work (Young, 2006). For youth work to be productive, Devlin & Gunning (2006) suggest that sufficient time is required to enable these types of relationships to form and develop. As creative activity sessions take time to complete, they not only provide a conduit to help establish trusting relationships. They also offer young people with opportunities to actively participate (Seebach, 2008) in the youth work environment and to develop new skills, learning and insights into their lives (NYA, 2011). Not surprisingly, material objects such as murals, paintings and pottery can be produced during these activities and may be invested by young people with significant meanings.

If places are the products of material practices (Massey, 2001, p.464), we can speculate about the effects of the presence of objects on display in a room, especially objects produced as a result of collaborative social practices between youth workers and young people. Sensitivity, therefore, to what a room may mean for young people becomes significant if the objects on display in that room represent or symbolise some aspect of a young person's development. Certain objects can therefore amplify the significance of a place and open up new associations. I came to appreciate the significance of objects in a meeting room in a dramatic way.

I interviewed a number of former participants of a youth service on the agency's premises. The interviews took place in a windowless "meeting room", off the corridor on the ground floor of a building accommodating a number of voluntary sector organisations in Sligo Town. I had previously visited this room on a number of occasions, interacting with practice educators and social professional students to review practice placement learning. The room always appeared cluttered: display units holding knickknacks and trinkets, walls with old information posters next to filing cabinets on which sat more knickknacks and photographs. This was a room badly in a need of a skip. However, once respondents started pointing to certain objects in the room and weaving them into their stories, the windowless "meeting room" took on a different meaning. Instead of seeing junk, the objects became valuable, manifesting the investment of youth work time and effort, bearing witness to the fruits of collaborative encounters.

Not only did objects permit respondents to tell stories of their own psychosocial transformations, the presence of objects also changed the meaning of the space in which the interviews were being conducted. No longer was the space just an interview room; it was as if the shared understanding of the space had changed. Massey (2001, p.460) states that "places are spaces of social relations". She talks about her parents moving to a working class suburb outside Manchester, "their lives have taken it in, and made it, for over half a century. Both they and it, and their relationship to one another ("place" and "people"), have changed, adjusted, readjusted, over time" (Massey, 2001, p.460). Similarly, the relationship between young people and the room in which I interviewed them was not fixed. The presence of objects expanded the interview room's meaning and its possibilities in a number of ways. Objects is



the room “anchor time” (Tuan, 1977, p.187), but not in a frozen way. Rather objects generated “interjective” places in the sense that the past, present and future can come into view. Particular places such as the meeting room where I interviewed young people constitute a time portal for young people.

Figure 1: Picture of “Interview Room”



Looking back, objects on display bear witness to the important role that youth workers played in the lives of young respondents and they are associated with moments of personal transformations. Certain objects point to specific times and locations when particular social practices took place. According to Orhan Pamuk (in Gee, 2016), “every object in our life corresponds to a moment”. If we see particular objects in the meeting room as acts of creation and symbols representing the possibility of transformation, what the respondent is pointing to is a series of moments in her life. For Pamuk (in Gee, 2016), “the lines that connect objects create stories and the lines that connect moments create time”. Mary and Gemina, for example, in their stories, connected productive, relational and celebratory moments linked to candles and pictures. The significance of these objects in their lives ensures that the room displaying them no longer functions just as a meeting room, or a production room or an interview room. For Pamuk it could also take on the character of a living museum, a place where “time is transformed into space” (Pamuk, in Gee (2016)) for former participants.

The room is alive because it bears witness to the existence of the past in the present. Mary and Gemina employed objects from the past to tell stories about transformative encounters where the effects of these encounters continue to resonate into their present lives. For the young

person who revisits the agency, she is reminded that a meeting room is not just any meeting space, but instead holds special meanings for her and the organisation, creating a link with the past. It is as if a continuous thread of time remains unbroken: the successful execution and materialisation of social practices continue to be recognised. Consequently, it is a place, which constitutes a “field of care”, a place which signifies the “affective bond between people and place or setting” (Tuan, 1974, p.4). If a youth organisation fulfils the symbolic role of a nurturing parent, the place where the objects are displayed represents a site of “enduring value, of nurture and support” (Tuan, 1977, p.29). By choosing to display objects, youth workers signal the continuing presence of young people in the life of the organisation. The youth organisation is bearing witness to young people’s lives. Young people are not forgotten, even though they have left the organisational “home”.

Objects on display also suggest that the room has a future orientation. By taking a conscious decision to bear witness to past achievements, the youth worker is stating that the organisation values both historical and future transformations. For Massey (1994, p.269), time is not separate to space in that space is central to the “production of history”. For youngsters starting their developmental journeys, the room bears physical witness not only to how other young people have been helped by the organisation, but also to how the organisation through its display of objects has been imprinted by former participants: they changed, why not I? Yet possible change will occur not just in the lives of future young people involved in the youth work programme. Change is also likely to occur in the meeting room space, in terms of its function and physical layout (e.g. the production and display of future artefacts) and in terms of the generation of new meanings and associations for future youth workers and participants.

## Discussion

In this section I want to reflect on the interesting role that youth workers can play in shaping the meanings associated with a meeting room. Different factors influence where youth workers interact with young people, and these factors can lead to youth workers, as in this study, interacting with young people in a windowless meeting room. Lefebvre (1991, p.38) perhaps might suggest that capitalism is ultimately responsible for spatial practices that lead to voluntary sector organisations with little money being forced to operate in this type of physical space. While many of us would deem such an environment to be unacceptable, what this study revealed is that youth workers can choose to infuse a limited physical space with rhizomatic possibilities. By placing crafts constructed by young people on bookshelves or pictures of awards ceremonies on walls, youth workers can organise a meeting space in such a way as to induce a particular sense of place in the former participant, a construction informed by previous social practices.

The anthropologist Marc Augé (1995, p. 96), cited in Hubbard and Kitchen (2011, p.9-10), discusses how familiar spaces such as supermarkets, shopping malls and airport lounges act as “non-spaces”. Hubbard and Kitchen (2011, p.10) interpret this to mean that non-places “do not act as localised sites for the celebration of real culture”. Perhaps it would be difficult to find a more “non-space” than a windowless meeting room, yet we have witnessed youth workers creating a place infused with possibilities. By displaying co-created objects and pictures of awards ceremonies, the room acknowledges and celebrates not only the development of young people but also their reconstituted community networks. Arguably, by choosing to display objects in a windowless room, youth workers may also be executing a form of resistance to budgetary constraints by inventing a new institutional space (Bright et al., 2013, p.749).

While issues of confidentiality need to be respected, the conscious decision by youth work professionals to display objects changes both the internal physical layout and the aesthetic qualities of a place. Rykwert (2016, p.11-12) writes that “Jacques Rancière defined aesthetics as the “distribution of the sensible”, where the aesthetic takes root in the sensuous immediacies of the individual while simultaneously bonding them to a greater whole – the community of feeling objects”. When considering the aesthetic of the meeting room from the perspective of former participants, one therefore has to consider their affective and cognitive response to the presence of objects linked to them, a response therefore framed by an “architecture of social relations” (Massey, 2001, p.462). While the aesthetic quality of the room is shaped by the presence of these objects, at the same time it connects young people to the wider community, expanding the spatiality of their lives (Massey, 2001). The paradox here is that while the room has physical limitations (e.g. no natural light), the objects on display evoke memories of shared subjectivities, while also expanding horizons. So despite the physical limitations, the room suggests a special place immersed in meanings, connecting people to the past, to others outside the room, while also offering possibilities.

Earlier, however, I mentioned that I found the room to be cluttered. The fact that I found the meeting room to be like this is interesting. The objects on display do constitute acts of performance, signalling that certain events have already taken place. The environment of the room suggests something subtler. The organisation has not presented a polished performance in terms of how it wants to present itself. Consequently, it suggests an organisation that is less concerned with promoting its own achievements and more in tune with recognising the importance of “remembering” the presence of former participants. This perspective chimes with a family deciding not pack away their children’s objects after they have left home. The bric-à-brac nature of the room suggests that the organisation is less concerned about using the space to convey a certain image of itself to others. This is a tight line for organisations to navigate: how to avoid a narcissistic, self-congratulatory or generic sense of place while at the same time treating the artefacts generated by its former participants with dignity. Walter Benjamin (1935, 2008) pointed to the danger of modern technology changing the status of works of art; similarly, there are modern pressures on organisations to showcase their wares and successes. The “aura” associated with objects and the rituals attached to their production can be lost if aesthetic contemplation is sunken by prioritising corporate performance. Can the clutter filling a room be seen as a practiced response to the emergence of a discourse accentuating corporate performance?

## **Conclusion**

Former participants of youth work programmes can invest objects on display in youth work agencies with symbolic significance, especially if these objects signal transformative experiences in their own lives. If this is the case, there are at least three implications for youth work practice. First, the visibility of certain objects is likely to be reassuring for at least some former participants of youth work programmes. These objects signal to young people that the youth work organisation is continuing to keep them in mind *after* their involvement with the programme has ended. The message communicated to the young person is that the transformative work undertaken by her continues to be remembered and publicly acknowledged by the organisation. After young people have concluded a programme, youth work organisations therefore need to consider their policy towards the disposal of co-created objects, testimonials, thank you letters, pictures of awards ceremonies, newspaper clippings, etc., especially if these materials are likely to hold symbolic associations. Second, youth work spaces are not neutral venues. Youth workers and young people shape the meanings of the space in which they engage with one another. A youth work agency space can be converted

into a personalised and invested sense of place, representations evoked by the presence of particular kinds of objects. A question, however, to ask is what are the reasons for an organisation agreeing to present objects associated with young people in certain ways and in particular rooms? These can be deliberate choices made by an organisation. Consequently, a challenge for youth work organisations is to display endowed artefacts in such a way as to authentically and responsibly bear witness to the developmental journeys of young people with whom they have interacted. Third, certain objects on display in youth work settings can testify to the outcome of previous youth work encounters. Their presence can provide an opportunity for youth workers to facilitate former, current and prospective participants of youth work programmes to reflect on the possibility of making tangible changes to their lives. Consequently, another challenge for youth work agencies is to reflect on how they can employ certain objects in ethical and creative ways in their programmes. At the very least, for example, youth workers can incorporate these objects into stories about how other young people have engaged in youth work programmes.

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